

Pawtucket's Arts & Entertainment Initiative: An Economic Engine Bringing New Life, Vitality to the City

In 1793, Samuel Slater constructed and operated the first cotton-spinning machine in America at the Slater Mill site in Pawtucket, igniting America's Industrial Revolution. The City of Pawtucket was the nation's first industrial site and today has one of the largest manufacturing bases in Rhode Island.

More than 70 mill properties and complexes, housing manufacturing firms, offices, life/work lofts and artist studios are located with the City. Pawtucket's growing artist community was accelerated in 1999 when the City's Arts & Entertainment District came into being.

Pawtucket's art policy initiative to attract artists to unused and underutilized mill spaces is gradually transforming these properties. Mayor James E. Doyle has received recognition for these efforts by the U.S. Conference of Mayors and most recently by the Providence-based Arts & Business Council of Rhode Island. Moreover, newspaper articles have appeared across the nation noting Pawtucket's efforts to save its old mill properties.

While the City's arts policy initiative was economically driven, it had a preservation goal of saving used and underutilized historic buildings throughout the City's struggling downtown.

In just the last few years, preservation of Pawtucket's mills and historic commercial properties, in the City's Arts & Entertainment District that encompasses 60 streets and 23 mill sites, has also occurred in dozens of properties. Many of these properties were once vacant, but now are being renovated by artists and creative sector companies.

This is a sampling of Pawtucket's historic properties preserved and now seeing new uses as a result of the City's ongoing arts policy initiative.

Internationally-recognized restaurant designer Morris Nathanson and his wife, Phyllis, have breathed new life into the former Rhode Island Cardboard Company by transforming the 25,000 sf of space into 13 live/work spaces and studios in 1986. Blackstone Studios, at 163 Exchange Street, was the first legal live/work loft sites in the City. Over the years, artists and creative sector companies have enjoyed their spaces because of high ceilings, hardwood floors, open spaces and large windows.

As a result of the City's arts initiative, the Nathansons are moving ahead to convert the remaining 25,000 sf adjoining mill into an additional 12 studios.

Next to the Nathanson's mill, new tenants will move into Riverfront Lofts, a new live/work loft conversion at the former Lebanon Mill, at 10 Exchange Court. The \$15 million 110,000 sf mill rehabilitation project will create 60 live/work style condos. This is one of the few remaining mill buildings sited on the Blackstone River. Funding for this project is provided by BankRI with participation from JP Morgan-Chase Manhattan Bank and Bank of Newport.

Across the street, The Sandra Feinstein Gamm Theatre has moved into the vacant annex of the Pawtucket Armory. The Pawtucket Armory Association, overseeing the rehabilitation of the historic armory will ultimately turn the site into 40,000 sf regional performing arts center. The play, "A Child's Christmas in Wales," kicked off the theatre company's first season in the Gothic-looking armory building that has been formerly the home of the Rhode Island National Guard.

Next to the Pawtucket Armory, the John W. Little Company became the home of Mirror Image, a textile printing company. Owner Rick Roth brought 25 jobs to this 26,000 sf unused mill. Originally labels and

tags were printed in this mill. Now Mr. Roth's company silkscreen prints more than one million t-shirts annually, including the recent official National Football League's Patriot Super Bowl shirts in stores everywhere.

Michael Cronin, of Classic Display, purchased the R.B. Gage Company mill, at 80 Fountain Street, to operate his company which fabricates displays and signage. Twelve artists are operating studios in 22,000 sf out of the 100,000 sf mill, that originally was used to manufacture cotton yarn.

Meanwhile, the Providence-based developer, Seven Stone Building Group, will shortly purchase the former Parkin Yarn mill from the limited partnership that owns it. The developers plan to create 25 live/work condos in the 39,000 square foot five-story flat roofed mill brick building, located at 32 Commerce Street. The historic mill property has been vacant for over 10 years after being the home of a host of manufacturers.

As part of the Parkin Yarn project, the City is providing \$300,000 in federal HOME funds to create six affordable units and undertaking parking and roadway improvements for this section of downtown. Along with this revitalization effort, the Pawtucket Redevelopment Agency (PRA) will soon purchase the former Old Colony Bank Building. PRA will then offer the property for purchase and rehabilitation. This 16,152 sf property has also been vacant for ten years.

Since the beginning of Pawtucket's arts initiative a number of vacant commercial properties have been transformed into live/work lofts and studios.

Richard Kazarian, an antique dealer and designer, purchased the former U-Pick Shoe Store at 9 Montgomery and converted the 2,190 sf space to a home/studio. This historic property formerly housed the Pawtucket Progressive Spiritualist Lyccum. The property had been vacant for years.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kazarian is also purchasing the underutilized Elks Club, on 27 Exchange Street, to bring it back to its former luster. This commercial property was specifically designed to be an Elks Club. Built in a Mediterranean style, the 20,000 sf well-recognized Pawtucket landmark, located in the City's Time Square, will be turned into artist studios, restaurants, and offer artistic venues.

Finally, Mr. Kazarian also purchased the 6,500 Gorman Furniture Company building at 400 Main Street. The oldest part of this structure, dating back to the 1830s, sits next to one of the oldest City fire stations. This property has been vacant for several years before being purchased by the antique dealer.

Architect Joe Haskett and Kirsten Murphy, a graphic artist, recently brought new life to the 3,537 former Schaffer's Furniture Company building at 163 Broad Street. Built in 1926, the couple purchased the property and created a live/work loft and studios.

Artist Scott Roop has also purchased the long-vacant former Hospital Trust Building with a later addition building built in 1946 at 216 Main Street, turning over 8,000 sf commercial bank building into artist studios.

Two Ton, Inc., an architectural firm formerly based in San Francisco, CA, also came to Pawtucket because of the City's arts initiatives. The company recently purchased the 3,500 sf former motorcycle repair shop at 49/51 Montgomery Street, across the Pawtucket Post Office.

In addition, the Pawtucket Boys & Girls Club, created a 7,000 sf arts center in the former Fleet Bank building at 210 Main Street. Among its uses is an educational teaching center. This Pawtucket landmark now serves as the permanent performance space for Stone Soup Coffee House.

Even outside the boundaries of Pawtucket's 307 acre Arts & Entertainment District, the largest in the state, the City is seeking the arts initiative bring in developers to preserve old mill buildings, transforming them

into live/work lofts and studios.

Central Industry Properties, LLC, a Warren-based developer, has recently purchased the 300,000 sf former American Insulated Wire complex, at 36 Freeman Street. The developers will create mixed uses for this mill. Targeting Pawtucket's growing arts community, the first phase of this project, now called the Phillips Wire Company Lofts, will develop 28 live/work lofts and 48 studios, totaling 200,000 sf.

A developer by the name of 545 P. Associates has reused the 145,000 sf former Chernack Manufacturing Company mill at 545 Pawtucket Avenue, and the 95,000 sf American Textile Company Mill, at 250 Esten Avenue, into studios for more than 100 artists.

Nearby, Rag and Bones Bindery creates handcrafted books at 1088 Main Street, in a 7,600 sf mill built in 1920. In addition to purchasing and rehabilitating this property, the former Providence-based company came to Pawtucket with 15 jobs.

560 Mineral Spring Avenue, LLC, converted some of its 300,000 sf textile mill in the Lorraine Mills Complex at 560 Mineral Spring Avenue into space for artists. Currently 50 artists operate studios in the mill with an additional 40 studios planned for development in the next 24 months. These studios will take up approximately 100,000 sf of space in this mill.

Also in the former Lorraine Mills Complex, Providence Metallizing Company at 51 Fairlawn Avenue is also converting some of its mill property into space for Catalyst Arts, an acclaimed Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) program and artist studios. Recently RISD's educational program moved into a part of the 7,800 sf mill at 597 Mineral Spring Avenue. Also, at a mill at 601 Mineral Spring Avenue, this Pawtucket manufacturing company plans to develop 20,000 sf, gradually phasing in artist studios into 100,000 sf of space over the next five years.

While many urban industrial cities are losing young adults because of reduced employment opportunities, Pawtucket's arts development policies are bringing the creative artists and entrepreneurs back into its old mills to live or operate a business or studio.

Pawtucket's Arts & Entertainment policy has brought new life to the Pawtucket's historic downtown core and throughout the 8.9 square mile radius of the City. Over 850,000 sf of space in historic mills and commercial properties have been saved, restored and are seeing new uses as artist live/work, studios, or housing artistic venues.

An Arts & Entertainment initiative can bring innovative and creativity into a community. Additionally, it can enhance the quality of life in a community. As an economic engine the growing number of artist studios and live/work lofts can bring restaurants, create jobs, and attract tourist dollars.

For more information about Pawtucket's Arts & Entertainment initiatives, call Herb Weiss, Pawtucket's Economic & Cultural Affairs Officer, at 401/724-5200; or e-mail to: hweissri@aol.com.